



BELIEF IN SOCIETY

WHY DO THINGS
FALL APART?

DEMOCRACY
IN DANGER

THE LIMITS OF
HUMAN KINDNESS

MOSQUES AND
THE FAR RIGHT



In this ISSUE

Magazine of the Institute for
Advanced Study in Toulouse

Commissioning editor
Jean-François Bonnefon

Editor-in-chief
Tiffany Naylor

**Reporting and editorial
contributions**
James Nash

Iconography
© StudioTchiz, © FreePik,
© Studio La Botte, © Adobe Stock,
© Pascal Bernardon, Unsplash

ISSN number: 3036-5287

Graphic design, layout
Studio La Botte
studio-labotte.fr

300 magazines printed
on 100% recycled paper
Iso14001 - Imprim'Vert



KEEP IN TOUCH

Contact us

IAST
1, Esplanade de l'Université
31080 Toulouse
Cedex 06, France
+33 (0)5 67 73 29 76

Follow us



This magazine has been funded
by a French government subsidy
managed by the Agence Nationale
de la Recherche under the
framework of the *investissements
d'avenir* programme reference
ANR-17-EURE-0010.



OUR SCIENTIFIC VISION

**IAST is a unified scientific project that
aims to study human behavior.**

Our ambition is to break down
artificial disciplinary boundaries to
unlock new ideas and address the
challenges of the 21st century. We
have a team of resident full-time
researchers in Toulouse, meeting
several times a week across all social
sciences. IAST researchers also work
in partnership with economists and
mathematicians at Toulouse School
of Economics, Toulouse Capitole
University, INRAe and CNRS. Our
methods focus on analytical and
quantitative methods, including case-
study evidence. We believe our work
needs to spread across the oceans
so every year we welcome visits from
some of the world's leading thinkers,
including a network of scholars from
27 countries.

IAST MAG #22 CONTENTS

IAST HIGHLIGHTS

Events and news		4
Newcomers		6
Crossing Channels		8

WHY DO THINGS FALL APART?

Fight for your rites		11
Is religion in decline?		13
The business of belief		14
Mosques and the far right		15
The limits of human kindness		16
Voting by god		18
Is democracy in danger?		20
Forward thinking		22

Editorial

The power of gods



What do you believe in? IAST researchers are committed to working together on the deepest questions about human nature and society. Our interdisciplinary research teams study our evolved behavior in groups, networks and coalitions. We explore the impact of formal institutions and informal norms, the constraints of scarce resources, and the influence of ideals and beliefs.

This issue of IAST magazine is a foray into the heart of this sprawling labyrinth, focusing on the role of religion. As anthropologist **Harvey Whitehouse** observed in his IAST Distinguished Lecture, one of the highlights of this year's calendar, human behavior has always been inspired by spiritual beliefs and practices. We review his wide-ranging exploration of the psychological biases that were forged in our evolutionary past and continue to shape our present and future.

From enchanting rituals to magical thinking, these ideas prepare the ground for our own researchers' discussion of the power of 21st-century beliefs. Former IAST director **Paul Seabright** talks about the business of belief as explored in his insightful book *The Divine Economy*. Meanwhile, **Ahmed Ezzeldin Mohamed** explains why religion has been able to maintain its grip on electoral politics, even in countries that are becoming less religious.

As a counterpoint to the 'Friends and Family' theme of our previous issue, we also zero in on societal breakdown and the darker reaches of human nature. In particular, **Margot Dazey** and **Victor Gay** reveal the geography of Islamophobia in France, **Charlotte Cavallé** and **Karine Van Der Straeten** examine the limits of our fairness beliefs, and **Felix Dvinger** discusses group identity and the war on democracy.

I am a firm believer that social science can help us address such challenges. Ingela Alger, my illustrious predecessor as IAST Director, has already planted the seeds of discovery, establishing the new Department of Social and Behavioral Sciences to cultivate IAST interdisciplinarity within the fertile grounds of Toulouse School of Economics. This is a project that fills us with confidence on the path of scientific endeavor.

With every faith in our future,

JEAN-FRANÇOIS BONNEFON

Director, IAST and TSE Department of Social
and Behavioral Sciences

CHANGING OF THE GUARD

Thank you, Ingela

After four years at the helm, **Ingela Alger** has stepped down as IAST director. She has been a driving force of the IAST project since 2012, leading the Biology program before becoming Scientific Director. Among her brightest achievements, she recently oversaw the creation of the Department of Social and Behavioral Sciences (SBS) that fuses IAST interdisciplinary strengths into TSE research and teaching programs.



Embodying its reputation for scientific excellence, Ingela describes IAST as a “French jewel” that needs great care and attention. This is a challenge for which the Toulouse scientific community is well equipped, believes **Jean-François Bonnefon**, the new Director of IAST and SBS: “For 10 years, TSE has relied on IAST to lay the foundations for an innovative project: integrating quantitative social sciences beyond economics. Now it’s up to these disciplines to lift TSE to new heights.”

Jean-François is a CNRS research director who is also affiliated with Toulouse School of Management and Artificial and Natural Intelligence Toulouse Institute. His prolific research output ranges across computer science, psychology and economics, and he is widely known for his work on moral machines and the ethics of autonomous driving.

WELCOME TO THE FACULTY

IAST can now draw on the multidisciplinary strengths of 18 permanent faculty members, thanks to the addition of three talented researchers to TSE’s Department of Social and Behavioral Sciences.



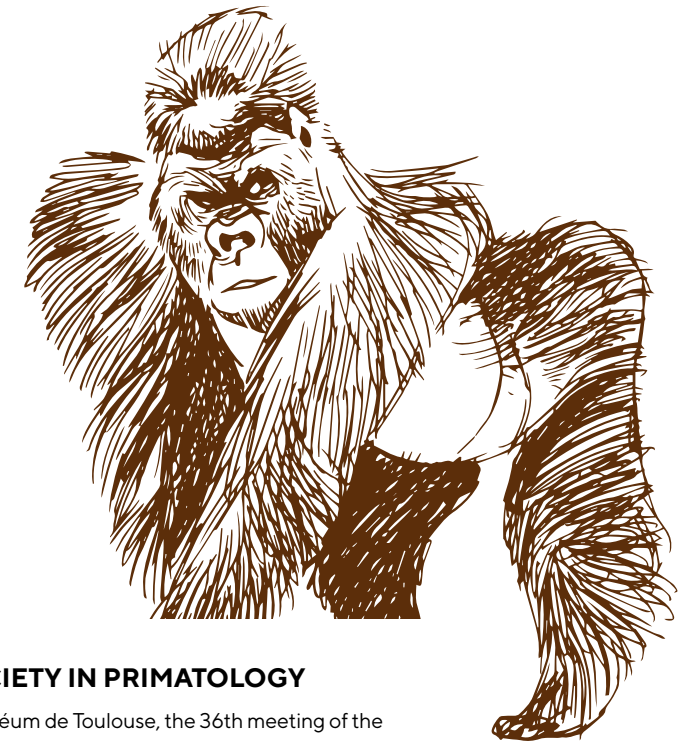
CÉSAR A. HIDALGO
Professor
PHYSICS



MARION HOFFMAN
Assistant Professor
SOCIOLOGY AND NETWORKS



CATHERINE MOLHO
Assistant professor
PSYCHOLOGY



Oct.
15-18
2024

SCIENCE AND SOCIETY IN PRIMATOLOGY

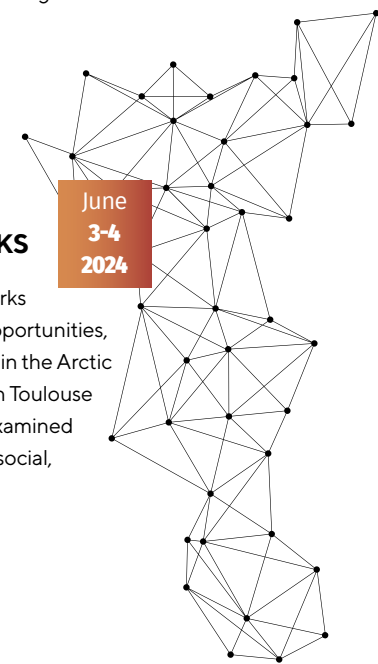
Cohosted by IAST and Muséum de Toulouse, the 36th meeting of the Société Francophone De Primatologie invited biologists, ecologists and anthropologists to engage with other disciplines, artists and the general public. Conservation and communication were central themes with special events dedicated to biodiversity loss, animal ethics, and the challenges of scientific outreach. As well as offering crucial insights into human behavior, leading primatologists showed how our evolutionary cousins – from mountain gorillas to infant olive baboons – can help us to tackle major societal issues such as public health and climate change.



IDENTITY AND POLITICS

May
15-16
2024

Why are social and cultural divides fueling the rise of nationalist and populist movements? Organized by Felix Dwinger (see page 20) and his colleagues on IAST’s Leadership, Power and Inequality team, this multidisciplinary workshop explored the latest research on the power of group identities.



June
3-4
2024

INEQUALITY IN NETWORKS

How can we ensure that social networks provide equal access to resources, opportunities, and information? From food security in the Arctic to poverty traps in South Asia, the 11th Toulouse Economics and Biology Workshop examined why network interaction can amplify social, economic and cultural disparities.



IAST is adding fresh ingredients to its recipe for success. You'll soon learn more about these gifted newcomers, as their engagement with the Toulouse scientific community sparks exciting and surprising discoveries. To whet your appetite, here's a taste of the big questions that inspire their research.

RESEARCH FELLOWS



JESSE FENNEMAN
EVOLUTIONARY
PSYCHOLOGY

Is it good to be impulsive?

Jesse works on formal modeling, decision making, impulsivity and ecological rationality. He now studies how knowledge of decision making can improve the world of work..



ALEXANDROS GELASTOPOULOS
MATHEMATICS

Are successful people lucky or talented?

Alexandros uses mathematical models to study human behavior and interactions. His work on ranking-based reinforcement shows how other people's choices influence our decisions.



VIOLETA HAAS
POLITICAL SCIENCE

How do institutions and elites shape intergroup relations?

Violeta focuses on state-sponsored discrimination, social norms, electoral behavior, party competition, gender and social movements. Her research shows legislative action against discrimination in court can reduce hate crime.



PABLO J. VARAS ENRÍQUEZ
BIOLOGICAL
ANTHROPOLOGY

Why have a baby?

From an evolutionary perspective, Pablo looks at how social and environmental factors impact reproduction. For example, women may have their first child earlier when exposed to more wealth uncertainty.

VISITORS



DEAN MOBBS
(visiting all year)
NEUROSCIENCE

How do our brains respond to danger?

Using brain imaging and novel behavioral techniques, Dean hopes that his pioneering study of fear at Caltech can improve treatment of PTSD, anxiety and other mental disorders.



MARIE BEIGELMAN
ECONOMIC HISTORY,
DEVELOPMENT AND
POLITICAL ECONOMY

A legacy of violence

How did violence during slavery affect its victims' descendants in the Caribbean? "The high rate of intra-familial violence and absent fathers in Caribbean societies has led scholars to impute a potential link between slavery and family environment," says IAST newcomer Marie Beigelman, "but they had limited empirical evidence."



Using 19th-century civil registries (as pictured, right) and information about criminals sent to Guyana, Marie's work reveals that violence during slavery was linked to planters' economic incentives related to the type of crop and competition on the sugar market. After abolition, she shows that the presence of fathers exposed to the worst enslavement conditions was associated with large adverse effects on child health. This, she finds, could be explained by harsher conditions leading to more violent men. Her sophisticated AI methods for analyzing historical documents

also allow her to examine the cruel reach of individual slave owners and the "deadliest" plantations.

Marie has also studied domestic abuse during Spain's Covid-19 lockdown, documenting a 32% fall in detection of male-based violence through the healthcare system. Despite a 48% increase in reports of gender violence to an emergency hotline, lockdown led to a loss of 1,500 protection orders.



Greta Thunberg joins Indigenous youth at the head of the climate march in Montreal, September, 2019.

When is a leader too old?

Produced by University of Cambridge's Bennett Institute and IAST, the third season of Crossing Channels came to close in front of a live audience at the *Institut Français* in London. This was a fitting venue for a joint enterprise between the UK and France's great universities, said former BBC correspondent Rory Cellan-Jones, who is stepping down as host of the podcast. In this episode, ahead of Joe Biden's historic decision to pull out of the US election, our experts drew on their research in economics and anthropology to discuss the need for constraints on elderly leaders.

Diane Coyle (Bennett Institute): A good leader needs a portfolio of attributes: technical skill, age and experience, judgment, a range of people around you. Do you want somebody who knows how to operate things or fresh ideas? You might say there should be a maximum age for a position of responsibility, just as we have a minimum age. But people age differently so it should be about testing their fitness for the role.

One of the issues is older people's lack of understanding about rapidly changing technology. Medical innovations, genetic technology and zero-carbon energy... Can Joe Biden and Donald Trump evaluate generative AI policies? You might be addressing leaders who are still printing out their emails.

We've got an ageing population, so compulsory retirement is not going to happen. It would get rid of some very good people and breach principles of non-discrimination over personal characteristics. The things to go for are term limits and reduction in the voting age so that younger people have more influence.



From left, Diane Coyle (Bennett Institute), Ruth Mace (UCL), Rory Cellan-Jones, Paul Seabright (IAST).

Ruth Mace (UCL, IAST): Do cultural norms change because the whole population changes its view? Or do we have to wait for generations to die out? Overwhelmingly, it's the latter. Attitudes to homosexuality are a major outlier; otherwise, it's frightening how much change requires older cohorts to move on. The younger generation might be looking at very different leadership criteria, like Greta Thunberg's moral integrity.

Leaders may be hanging on just because they're powerful. An awful lot of the world has gangster politics. If you killed a lot of people on the way up, you won't live very long on the way down. So, you get rid of any rules that force you to retire.

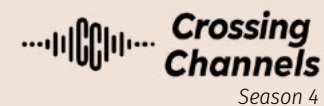
Leaders should retire much earlier than 70 because our mental and physical capacities get bad quite rapidly. In pre-war Japan, the father at 60 was meant to pass the running of the household to his son. I'm a hypocrite: over 60 and not retiring. That's why you have to get me out.

Paul Seabright (IAST): Over the past 30 years, chief executives in Europe and America have been getting older by about a year per decade. I'm not worried about whether older leaders are better or worse on average, but what happens in a crisis? Future leaders will be increasingly troubled by dementia and may be very difficult to replace.

We tend to select leaders for skills like delivering a good speech. We can all tell whether Biden is less skillful in getting down steps. But it's much harder to assess his judgment about dealing with aggression in the Asia Pacific, and that can have world-shattering consequences.

We haven't thought creatively enough about how to use the wisdom, expertise and experience of older people. But to be able to launch a war at 82 or 85, cutting decades off other people's life expectancy, would seem a breach of the social contract. We need a younger compulsory retirement age for those who make critical, potentially existential decisions.

FIND OUT MORE



Our podcast series is back for a fourth season, with a new host and fresh perspectives. Drawing on expertise from IAST and University of Cambridge's Bennett Institute, former BBC journalist Richard Westcott will lead discussion of complex challenges including 21st-century prisons, mental health, AI technologies, and democratic survival. Listen to the latest episodes at www.iast.fr/podcast



WHY DO THINGS FALL APART?



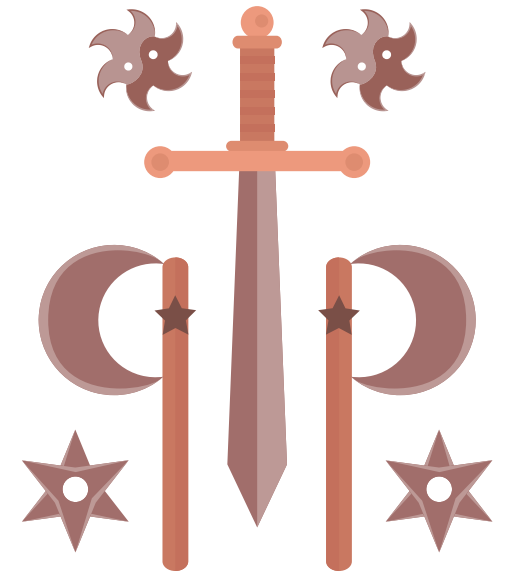
— 10 —



HARVEY WHITEHOUSE

SACRED BONDS

Fight for your rites



Over millions of years, humans evolved to conform, believe and belong. From early foraging bands to complex civilizations, cultural evolution built on these psychological foundations over thousands of years, says anthropologist Harvey Whitehouse, continuing to shape our lives today. In his IAST Distinguished Lecture, he explained why we cannot eliminate our innate biases. Instead, we must learn from our ancestors to harness them more effectively.

As a young researcher in Papua New Guinea, the people Whitehouse lived with were curious about Europe and its strange technologies. Why are our cultures so different? His latest book, *Inheritance*, explores the evolutionary origins of the modern world. Surveying the latest scientific research, he argues that conformism, religiosity, and tribalism are not only the cause of most of our problems today – they could also be the solution.

From birds to primates, many species use imitation to learn skills and earn rewards. Humans do this too, but they also engage in forms of copying that seem much stranger. If you show children a complicated way of retrieving an object from a box, they'll copy not only the causally necessary behavior but also the pointless actions. In fact, 4-6 year olds copy more faithfully when the action has no conceivable end goal. According to Whitehouse, this kind of "overimitation" has a vital role in establishing rituals, customs, and entire cultural traditions.

Whitehouse shows that for most of human prehistory, small-scale societies were united by irregular, locally distinctive rituals that were continually mutating. Emerging alongside farming around 10,000 years ago, routinized ritual gradually enabled much larger-scale traditions to stabilize. He argues that routinization makes it easier to replicate rituals faithfully and to detect deviation; it also makes us more willing to accept what leaders tell us. Drawing on a vast database of human history that Whitehouse helped to build, he shows that today's world religions were built on techniques for standardizing beliefs and practices developed in more

ancient societies. But nowadays similar processes are being taken over by social media platforms and other new technologies that allow norms to spread faster than ever before – often in ways that polarise us rather than bringing us together.

MAGICAL THINKING

If you let go of a ball, you'd expect it to fall. Intuitions like these about basic physics, shared by newborn babies, have influenced the way ideas about supernatural beings arise and spread. Minimally counter-intuitive (MCI) constructs take a normal physical agent and add a few magical properties that are just attention-grabbing enough to be memorable, but not so implausible as to leave us baffled. All societies are enchanted by simple notions of supernatural agency – for instance witches who defy intuitive gravity expectations by flying on broomsticks – but not beings that only exist on Wednesdays.

From cosmetics to vacuum cleaners, many companies sell products today by exploiting the same MCI thinking that attracts us to holy relics. Santa is a human-like agent whose reindeer and sleigh defy gravity and can pass through unfeasibly narrow chimneys. He also encourages the world to spend more than a trillion dollars on Christmas. Likewise, Halloween's flying witches and counterintuitive zombies are worth an annual \$10 billion in the US alone. Whitehouse describes many other features of our evolved psychology that make religious and moral ideas similar the world over and he argues that they have been hijacked by ad agencies to serve the commercial interests of elites. →

ALL FOR ONE, ONE FOR ALL

Which of these pictures represents your relationship with your group identity (family, religion, nation, etc)? Fused individuals will choose the image on the right and be passionate defenders of their group



Adapted from Swann et al., 'Identity Fusion: The Interplay of Personal and Social Identities in Extreme Group Behaviour', *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 2009.

RITUALS TO DIE FOR

In Papua New Guinea, male initiation rituals are painful ordeals that create powerful bonds between warriors. Intense group experiences and perceptions of shared biology produce an extreme form of social glue, known as 'identity fusion'. Numerous studies show that when the group is threatened, highly fused members will fight and die to protect it. This would help to explain why military leaders put recruits through harsh experiences of bootcamp, and why shared experiences of frontline combat can create bands of brothers.

Whitehouse shows that the evolution of social complexity was partly driven by warfare. This involved scaling up military cohesion. In small-scale societies, spirits and gods are believed to be unconcerned about whether people behave morally towards one another. According to Whitehouse, morality and religion only became entwined with the first multi-ethnic empires. These societies were too diverse to be united by shared ancestry. Instead, cooperation was partly based on shared beliefs and practices, woven through the new moralizing religions. People began to fuse not only with extended groups, but with core doctrines and sacred values that became worth dying for. Now these same processes are driving forms of extremism and mass violence that increasingly present an existential threat to our entire species.

UNITING OUR TRIBES

Surprisingly, Whitehouse argues that our evolved psychology could be harnessed to build better societies. Powered by rituals, Whitehouse describes studies suggesting we can use school classes to embed future-

minded attitudes and establish more sustainable lifestyles. Celebrating purposeful capitalism and prosocial contributions, he argues, could make jobs more motivating. Rituals could help us reduce rather than increase carbon emissions. Religions could take the lead in stewardship of the planet and of what many see as 'God's creation'. Although Whitehouse pinpoints many problems in the modern world, his central message is one of hope.

Above all, he argues that we can draw on our evolved psychology and the discoveries of our ancestors to build a more peaceful and sustainable future. One example of this is the way identity fusion could be harnessed to combat violent extremism. According to Whitehouse, the same shared experiences that divide us could just as effectively be used to unite us, as they did during the Christmas ceasefires of World War One. He and his colleagues found that when people reflect on shared suffering on both sides of the Israel-Gaza conflict, they adopt more positive attitudes towards the outgroup. They have also found that prisoners who can be helped to fuse with law-abiding groups and values get into less trouble, become healthier and more resilient. Politicians who cross barriers are motivated by the recognition of shared experiences on both sides of intergroup conflicts. Whitehouse also presents evidence that merely acknowledging the shared experiences and origins of humanity at large can create feelings of fusion that increase donations to global charities.

FIND OUT MORE

Inheritance: The Evolutionary Origins of the Modern World is published by Penguin. For more on Whitehouse's work, visit his website at harveywhitehouse.com

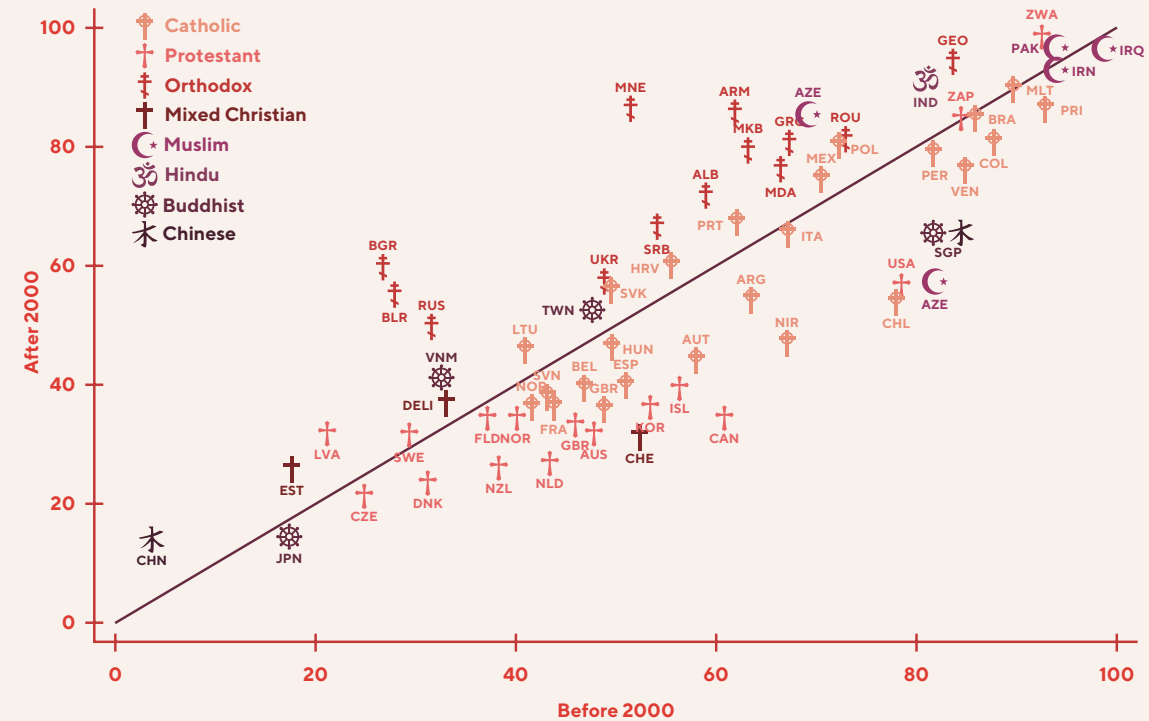


PAUL SEABRIGHT

WORLD BELIEVERS

Is religion in decline?

To study global trends, Paul Seabright compares the reported importance of religion before and after 2000. There is no clear tendency for countries to lie above the line that divides those with increasing religiosity from those where it is on the wane.



Countries at the high end are predominantly Muslim; otherwise, there are no clear clusters by religious category. Religion has lost 5.2 percentage points in Catholic countries, lost 8.7 percentage points in Protestant countries, and gained 17.7 percentage points in Orthodox countries.

The upshot? Religion is declining in some countries, advancing in others, with no overall trend toward increasing or decreasing importance.

Source: *The Divine Economy*, 2024

PAUL SEABRIGHT

DIVINE ECONOMY

The business of belief

Holy leaders can inspire us with poetic messages, colorful stories and otherworldly dreams but their power also rests on more earthly prose of economic incentives and political strategy. In a new book, former IAST director Paul Seabright argues that religions act as platforms that compete for consumers by offering a range of flexible services.

WHY DO RELIGIOUS PLATFORMS OFTEN OUTPERFORM SECULAR ONES?

Religions create a performative space where we can articulate our needs as social animals and find group solutions. Their communities are bonded by collective rituals and enchanting narratives that instill a sense of purpose in people's lives, increasing trust in the platform's services and members.

WILL RELIGIONS STAY IN BUSINESS?

Religion is alive and well in the non-Western world. Even in more skeptical countries, religious platforms have modified their services to address human needs. It's only when they are seen as partisan political actors that religions slowly lose the authority this gives them.

IS NEW TECHNOLOGY A MIXED BLESSING?

Like the printing press which sparked the Reformation, today's digital advances have slashed the costs of sending plausible messages. This has intensified religious rivalry by facilitating comparison of different movements, forcing them to adapt and evolve.



But the disruption is unlikely to change their focus on meeting demand for trusted communities.

WHY DO SECTS CLASH OVER OBSCURE THEOLOGY?

Religious doctrines provide a distinctive marker of group belonging, but the theology becomes intensely important to insiders only *after* they have become members. Outsiders mostly couldn't care less, which is what marks them as outsiders.

ARE WOMEN MORE PIOUS THAN MEN?

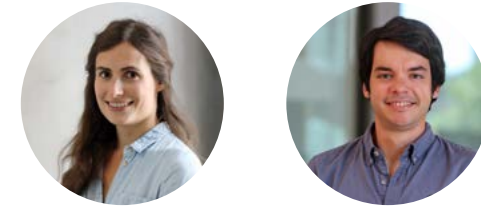
Greater religiosity is only found among Christian women, with roots in the way Christianity appeared to offer gender parity to the downtrodden of the Roman Empire. Elsewhere, religious platforms have found many ways to appeal to both men and women.

WHY HAVE 'MORAL' MOVEMENTS SEEN AN EPIDEMIC OF SEXUAL ABUSE?

Sexual abuse is rife in secular as well as religious institutions, but it is particularly common when figures of authority are uncritically revered, with a monopoly of access to vulnerable individuals. The way to rein in such abuse is to provide denser networks, external accountability, and an end to cultures of silence.

FIND OUT MORE

Longlisted for the FT and Schroders Business Book of the Year 2024, *The Divine Economy* is published by Princeton University Press. To explore what happens when our prehistoric brain meets the modern world, visit Paul's personal website.



MARGOT DAZEY AND VICTOR GAY

STREETS APART

Mosques and the far right

Islamophobia has become a central plank of far-right movements, especially since 9/11. To investigate the religious dimension of Europe's anti-migrant backlash, a new IAST study at the crossroads of political science and sociology examines the relationship between support for Front National (now Rassemblement National) and the presence of mosques in French neighborhoods.

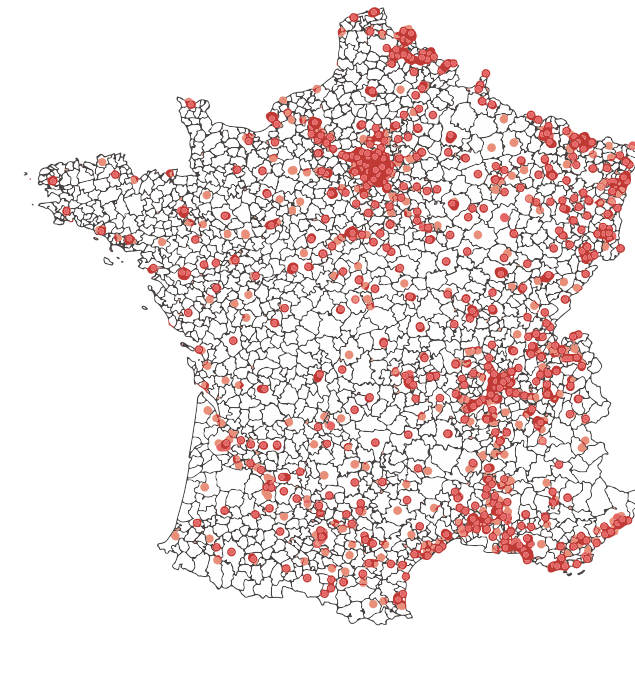
Research has shown a puzzling correlation between immigration and support for the far right in Europe. At the municipal level, large immigrant populations are linked to lower support, but this link is reversed at higher administrative levels. Our study considers an infra-municipal unit – the French polling station – drawing on an original dataset of mosques and combining election results from 2007 to 2010 with fine-grained socio-economic data from the CARTELEC database.

Controlling for the presence of local immigrants, we find that far-right support around mosques conforms to a **halo effect**: it increases with distance from the nearest mosque, up to an apex at about 16km, before decreasing. This is consistent with research suggesting French natives with no migration background who do not frequently interact with immigrants are less favorable toward them. Mosque visibility

also matters: we find that larger buildings and those with a minaret are associated with a more pronounced halo effect.

Our evidence helps to reconcile **intergroup contact** theory – high-quality interactions between Muslims and non-Muslims in neighborhoods with a mosque reduce the far-right vote – with **competition** and **group threat** theory – rare or fleeting intergroup contacts at intermediate distances from a mosque increase the far-right vote.

In rural environments, unlike the urban halo, we observe a steady decline in the far-right vote share as distance from the nearest mosque increases. This may be because rural residents feel more threatened by religious and ethnic diversity. Alternatively, religious buildings may appear more salient in rural areas.



MOSQUES IN FRANCE

This figure displays in red the locations of the 1,053 mosques in 1997 and 2012 administrative files. Additional mosques present in the 2012 file, which contains 2,130 mosques, are shown in orange. Dark lines represent the delineations of statistical zoning into life basins (*bassins de vie*). 'The Mosque Nearby' is forthcoming in *Comparative Political Studies*.



CHARLOTTE CAVALLÉ AND KARINE VAN DER STRAETEN

US AND THEM

The limits of human kindness

Inequality eats away at our social fabric, health and moral values, driving citizens apart. It can even harm economic growth. So why is there so little public opposition to growing wealth and income disparities? Why doesn't political pressure match the runaway revenues of tech barons and CEOs? Is diversity to blame? Returning to IAST from University of Michigan, Charlotte Cavallé joined Karine Van der Straeten to discuss the impact of immigration on the politics of redistribution.

WHY DO PEOPLE DISAGREE ABOUT THE FAIRNESS OF PUBLIC POLICIES?

Charlotte: The impulse to do the “right thing” is central to human cognition. We gain self-respect and social approval from supporting agreed norms of fairness. Most people agree that cooperative behavior should be rewarded and that individual gains be proportional to effort and talent. Where we differ is in our **beliefs** about the extent to which these norms have been broken. For example, if we believe that high and low earners tend to get what they “deserve”, rising income inequality is unlikely to affect demand for redistribution.

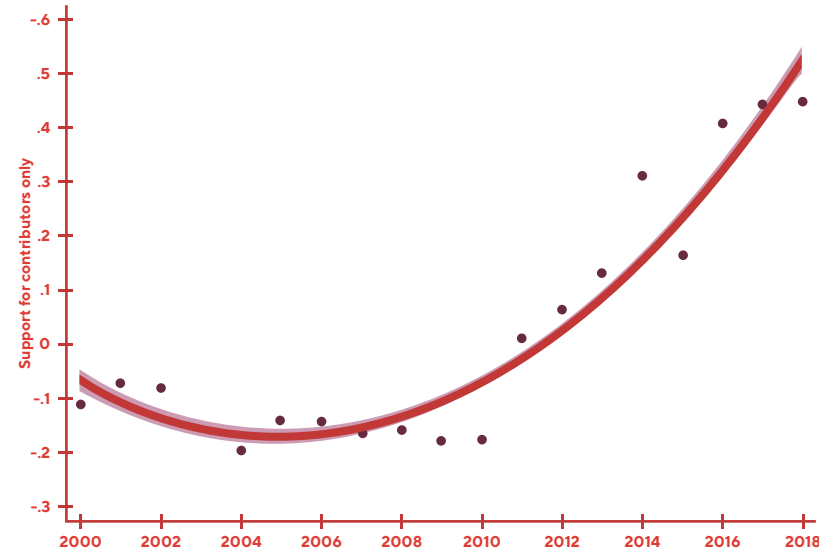
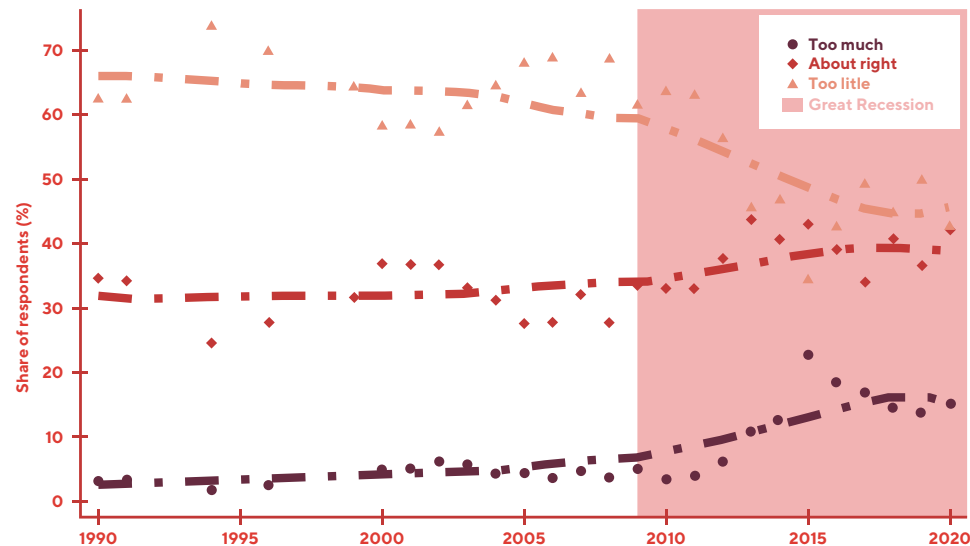
HOW DOES NATIVIST POPULISM INFLUENCE OUR GENEROSITY?

Karine: Research shows we tend to be more generous to members of our own group. In the United States, racial and religious divides reduce support for redistribution. Scholars worry that parochial tendencies are also undermining social solidarity in Europe, given the growth of non-Christian, non-white minority populations. Right-wing populists have mobilized resentment against policies that “unfairly” redistribute to perceived “free riders”, including immigrants who are perceived as over-represented among the poor and unemployed.

DO THE POOR GET ENOUGH HELP?

This graph plots the share of French survey respondents who say that government support for the poor is too little, about right or too generous.

Source: CREDOC



MEMBERS' CLUB

Support for making access to benefits conditional on past contributions has been increasing in France. Respondents are asked their opinion about conditional versus universal access with regards to healthcare, pensions, unemployment insurance and child benefits. Answers are combined into an index (as shown on y-axis).

Source: DREES

Charlotte: Our willingness to help a low-income individual can be reduced by information about their ethnicity or religion. However, once information regarding time spent in the country or birthplace is provided, the strict ethnic penalty disappears. People born abroad are penalized more, but the penalty decreases with time spent in the country.

Karine: Findings like these suggest group boundaries are porous, with generosity conditioned by “deservingness” cues such as work effort and payroll contributions. For example, Charlotte found that when British people are reminded of the National Health Service’s precarious finances, they are more likely to exclude not only immigrants but also smokers and people who have contributed little in taxes.

HOW HAS HISTORY SHAPED THE STRUGGLE TO BUILD FAIRER SOCIETIES?

Charlotte: Many transatlantic differences were forged by past traumas, including slavery and the Second World War. The politicization of racial boundaries and prejudice preceded the formation of the US welfare state, limiting its redistributive potential. In Europe, immigration-induced ethnic diversity became politically visible only after welfare states had matured into generous, inclusive institutions.

Policy feedback effects play a major

role too. Welfare states both rely on and foster high degrees of trust. Once created, social programs can also be hard to roll back due to interest groups formed by recipients and bureaucrats.

HOW CAN SELF-INTEREST MITIGATE THE EROSION OF SOLIDARITY?

Karine: Low-income natives, even if some of them feel some resentment toward immigrants, are strongly motivated by self-interest to preserve social benefits. I have studied such cross-pressured voters in past research with John Roemer and Woojin Lee. Besides, Europe’s social programs are less targeted than in the US, so recipients are less likely to be perceived as “undeserving immigrants”, and it has more cross-pressured voters who are likely to oppose benefit cuts. This may explain why right-wing populists in Europe now favor closed borders with **more**, not less, redistribution.

ANY ADVICE FOR PRO-REDISTRIBUTION POLITICIANS?

Charlotte: For policies that redistribute to the worse-off through the welfare state, weak coalitions can be built between low-income voters and richer “bleeding heart liberals” who believe that redistribution is fair because it mostly helps people who deserve to be helped. But for policies that affect the distribution of market income, the anti-egalitarian beliefs of rich voters oblige center-left leaders to focus on

fair processes instead of fair outcomes. While equal opportunity policies tend to generate consensual support, they are rarely enough to address the income inequalities generated by a competitive labor market.

Karine: Our review suggests that hostility to immigrants only weakly undermines support for redistributive policies in general. However, a greater threat to social solidarity may come from the targeting of benefits through institutional dualism and resource hoarding, as well as tensions over border control and EU membership. The key question might be ‘Who is the recipient?’ rather than ‘How much to share?’.

FIND OUT MORE

Charlotte’s book *Fair Enough?* is published by Cambridge University Press. Karine’s book *Racism, Xenophobia, and Distribution*, is published by Harvard University Press. Publications by Karine and Charlotte, including ‘Immigration and Support for Redistribution: Lessons from Europe’, are available to view on the IAST website.



AHMED EZZELDIN MOHAMED

RELIGIOUS COHESION

Voting by god

Religion is declining in much of the Christian world, even in Latin America. So why does it play such an important role at the ballot box, inflaming culture wars and swelling the ranks of the far right? Ahmed Ezzeldin Mohamed explains why religion's persistent grip on democratic politics is not as miraculous as it seems.

DO BELIEVERS GO TO CHURCH?

In a recent paper, John Huber and I present evidence that the relationship between religious belief and practice, though strong, varies considerably across countries. We use the World Values Survey (WVS) to measure *belief* and *church attendance* in 105 traditionally Christian democracies.

On average, more than half of believers are not participants. Similarly, more than a quarter of regular churchgoers do not believe. This suggests church attendance is not necessary for nurturing spiritual beliefs.

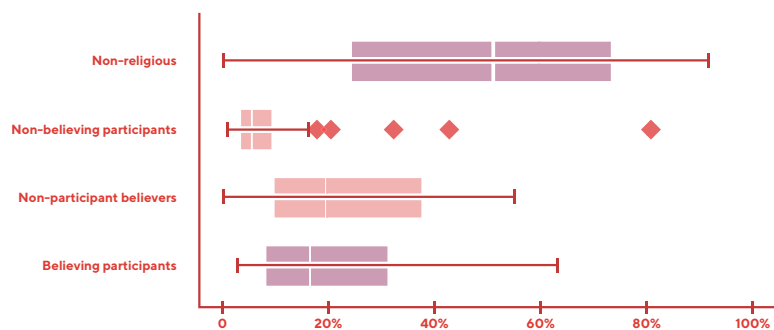
HOW DOES RELIGION IMPACT POLICY PREFERENCES?

On social issues, scholars have linked conservative policy preferences among the religious to innate moral values, authoritarian personalities, and even genetics. On economic issues, conservatism may stem from the psychological insulation from economic risk that religion provides and the benefits for the

religious poor from electoral coalitions with the rich. Our empirical analysis shows that conservative attitudes – regarding abortion, homosexuality, income inequality and individuals' responsibility for their own welfare – are much more strongly linked to belief than church attendance.

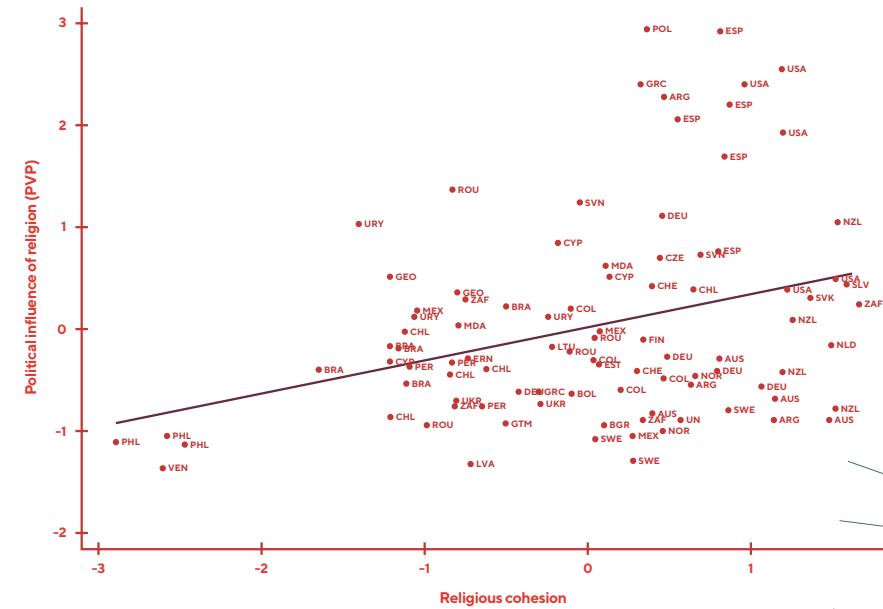
ARE CHURCHGOERS MORE POLITICALLY ACTIVE?

Previous research suggests church attendance increases political engagement by providing civic skills, proactive messaging, selective incentives, and political information. Churches can also be centers for political coalitions and targeting by elites. The impact of belief is less clear as religious ideologies can encourage political participation, but belief may also provide psychological comfort and other incentives to disengage from worldly affairs. Looking at individuals' self-reported voting, our results show that religious attendance has a much stronger association with political engagement than does belief.



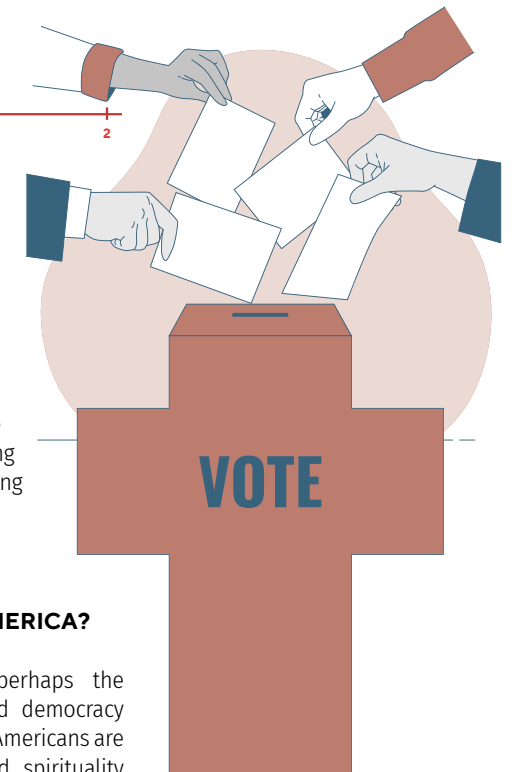
BELIEF AND PRACTICE

WVS data reveals substantial variation between countries. For example, believing participants represent 63% of respondents in Guatemala, but less than 3% in Sweden. Globally, 46% are non-religious.



BELIEF IN POLITICS

Party linkages with religion are strongest when the correlation between belief and participation (religious cohesion) is high. The PVP measure takes a higher value if faithful churchgoers support a different party than the non-religious.



WHY IS THE LINK BETWEEN BELIEF AND PRACTICE SO IMPORTANT?

This connection – which we call **religious cohesion** – can help us understand why religious divides emerge between voters. For any voting cleavage to exist, members of the group must be politically engaged with distinctive policy preferences. As strong religious beliefs are linked to distinctive policy preferences and church attendance is associated with political engagement, the coexistence of these two dimensions will strengthen the influence of religion on voters.

Our study finds robust correlational evidence to support this view. In democracies where belief and practice go hand-in-hand, individuals tend to vote according to their religious category. Where religious cohesion is weaker, religion has less impact on voting patterns.

WHY DO SOME SOCIETIES HAVE MORE RELIGIOUS COHESION?

Our empirical analysis shows that churchgoers are more likely to be believers in countries with higher levels of social protection. This is largely because non-believers have weaker material incentives to attend than in societies where churches play a greater role in providing food, education, healthcare and other services. Economic security may also help low-income believers to afford the costs of attending church, taking time away from paid work and other networks. These findings complete our answer to the mystery of religion's outsized political impact in increasingly

secular countries. Economic security is often cited as a predictor of declining religiosity. However, we show it can also increase religious cohesion, leading to stronger religious voting cleavages.

HOW DOES THIS EXPLAIN TRENDS IN THE US AND LATIN AMERICA?

The United States is perhaps the archetype of a developed democracy with high religiosity. Many Americans are abandoning churches and spirituality but they are mostly religious moderates. Our research suggests this will give religion even stronger influence on electoral competition, driven by smaller but more committed religious groups.

Chile has seen a dramatic increase in economic well-being and declining religiosity. Rather than predicting that religion's grip on politics will loosen, our research stresses the importance of considering how the form of religiosity has changed. Religious cohesion in Chile was six times higher in 2011 than in 1996, and the link between religiosity and party identification has strengthened as moral issues such as abortion and divorce laws have become more salient and polarizing.

FIND OUT MORE

'The Decline of Religion and Its Rise in Electoral Politics' and other related publications are available to view on Ahmed's personal website.



FELIX DWINGER

DIVIDED WE FALL

Is democracy in danger?

Multiple threats – including polarization, misinformation and inequality – are undermining our faith in elected governments. Nationalists and populists are also exploiting social and cultural rifts. An expert on autocratic politics and democratic backsliding, IAST’s Felix Dwinger explains why group identity is a pivotal battleground in the war on 21st-century democracy.

HOW DO GROUP IDENTITIES EMERGE?

Social identity theory tells us that groups are formed around a set of identity markers – or prototypes – with individuals assigning themselves to the groups they believe to most closely match their own sense of self. A group’s social status matters too. But group identities are not set in stone. They are social constructs whose salience and subjective appeal are shaped by

political institutions, such as electoral rules or administrative geography.

Social and political actors can also play a powerful role by manipulating our beliefs about group prototypes. For example, Viktor Orbán and his Fidesz party have upended Hungary’s political landscape, replacing the classic left-right cleavage with a cultural divide between conservative-authoritarian nationalists and libertarian globalists. In places as diverse as Venezuela, India, and the US, political entrepreneurs are creating and exploiting similar cultural faultlines.

HOW DO THEY SHAPE POLITICAL INTERACTION?

Peaceful and cooperative relations between identity groups are, perhaps surprisingly, much more common than violence and competition. Cooperation is often fostered between people from different ideologies by the fear

that disputes between individuals will quickly escalate into group conflict. In-group policing helps, too. We tend to avoid punishing out-group members if we expect the transgressor’s own identity group to sanction them.

Recent scholarship emphasizes localized contact in shaping integration, cooperation, and common bonds in communities with many small groups. When a community consists of a few large groups and is polarized, however, incentives for cooperation decline.

Unfortunately, political actors often have incentives to instil an us-versus-them mentality. US Democrats and Republicans, for example, are increasingly focused on what divides them rather than what they have in common. The danger is that politics turns into a fiercely competitive zero-sum game with devastating outcomes: political favouritism, socioeconomic decline, autocratic rule, full-blown



Source: Svobik, Milan W. 2020. ‘When Polarization Trumps Civic Virtue: Partisan Conflict and the Subversion of Democracy by Incumbents.’ *Quarterly Journal of Political Science* 15(1): 3-31.

conflict and war.

WHY SHOULD WE CARE ABOUT DEMOCRACY?

As Winston Churchill remarked: “Democracy is the worst form of government except for all those other forms that have been tried.” In a democracy, you can lose a political contest today but be confident that you will get another chance to win tomorrow.

Research has shown that democracy has many socially desirable outcomes, such as improving public health, literacy rates and income inequality. Admittedly, some studies suffer from threshold or pro-democracy biases. However, it does seem clear that democratic processes mitigate abysmal outcomes from economic crises. By promoting economic stability, democracy can benefit all risk-averse individuals.

HOW DO DEMOCRACIES DIE?

A military coup used to be the typical cause of death. Over the past three decades, however, democracies became two to three times more likely to be undermined from within as elected politicians hollow out the

institutional foundations that brought them to power.

Manipulation of elections undermines the potential of citizens to hold incumbents accountable. This happened in Nicaragua’s 2021 vote when the Ortega administration arrested opposition leaders. In their thirst for power, incumbents can also weaken other pillars of democracy. Poland’s PiS party, for example, has used unconstitutional legislation and procedural obstructions to keep vacancies in the judiciary open and undermine the court system.

HOW HAVE DEMOCRACY AND IDENTITY INFLUENCED RUSSIA’S WAR ON UKRAINE?

One of my current research projects suggests that Ukraine’s democratization and subsequent economic progress offer ordinary Russians a glimpse of their potential for development under democracy. In this context, an autocrat might choose to disrupt democratic progress abroad to avoid facing a future revolt at home. But this will only happen if the domestic audience believes both countries have a shared identity, as is the case for Russian perceptions about Ukraine. I am also looking further afield to find out whether this reasoning is

THE ENEMY WITHIN

Rather than military coup, democracies are now much more likely to succumb to executive takeover. This typically entails the gradual subversion of institutions by elected incumbents, as seen under Chávez in Venezuela, Putin in Russia, and Erdogan in Turkey.

more generalizable.

WHO IS WINNING THE WAR ON DEMOCRACY?

The jury is still out. The recent electoral turnover in Poland is a strong positive signal. Other developments in Hungary, the UK, or France suggest that democratic forces can close ranks and coordinate when push comes to shove. But democracy also faces new threats from cyberwarfare and social-media propaganda. Russia and China may be using such strategies to attack the democratic integrity and social fabric of liberal societies. And the 2024 US presidential elections have not improved the prospects for global democratic stability either, to say the least.

FIND OUT MORE

For more on Felix’s research, visit his personal website. He also contributed to our Crossing Channels podcast on the power of political protest.

Forward thinking

Grappling with god-like technologies and ancient biases, humanity faces an uncertain future. The research featured in this issue suggests religiosity will continue to be exploited for political gain and profit, opening up old wounds and new social fractures. It also shows why we need to harness the power of tribal tendencies that bring us together. There are reasons to be cheerful, IAST experts believe, if we hold on to our faith in society.



CATHERINE MOLHO
PSYCHOLOGY
ASSISTANT PROFESSOR, IAST

‘Humans are cooperative’

From Hobbes’ *Leviathan* to *Wall Street*’s Gordon Gekko, society has often been depicted as a battleground for fierce competition between independent individuals striving to achieve conflicting goals. In contrast, my research lends empirical support to Rousseau’s vision of human life as deeply interdependent, often involving egalitarian interactions in which people strive for mutual gain.

Documenting everyday experiences in the Netherlands, we found that benign, cooperative interactions were prevalent. In relationships with romantic partners, family, friends, colleagues, and even strangers, people most frequently thought of their interactions as mutually dependent, allowing the pursuit of joint gains, and mostly involving equal power. Conflicts of interest put cooperation at risk – reducing trust, relationship satisfaction, and commitment – especially in contexts of unequal power. Yet, although we observed that conflicts of interest were impactful, they were quite rare.

These findings suggest we should not overestimate the frequency of conflicts of interest. For most situations in daily life, people experience corresponding interests that do not require enforcement to achieve cooperation. Instead, in many cases, policymakers can achieve a lot by helping people to coordinate their behavior.



CÉSAR A. HIDALGO
PHYSICS
DIRECTOR, CENTER FOR COLLECTIVE LEARNING, CORVINUS UNIVERSITY OF BUDAPEST; PROFESSOR, IAST & TSE

‘AI could reinvent democracy’

Can we use AI to improve collective decisions? Direct democracy – where people vote directly on issues – forces each person to make far too many decisions on topics they know little about. But what if we combine direct democracy with software agents? In a recent paper we explore this idea by using several off-the-shelf large language models (LLMs) to explore augmented forms of political participation. We find that these software agents are better at predicting the political preferences of individuals than a rule based on their political affiliations, and also, that augmented data (data samples augmented by personalized AIs) are better at reproducing the aggregate preferences of a population than the samples alone. This helps us imagine a future where every citizen can have their own digital senator, able to read and vote on every bill. Citizens would be responsible for tracking and monitoring their avatar’s performance, all the way from autopilot to being asked to approve every decision.

Augmented democracy is an audacious idea filled with complex challenges. How do you train the avatars? How do you keep the data secure? How do you keep these systems distributed and auditable? We can start by experimenting in simple systems that can help us understand the principles shaping these new forms of participation.



AHMED EZZELDIN MOHAMED
POLITICAL SCIENCE
ASSISTANT PROFESSOR, IAST

‘Religious norms can put pressure on autocrats’

Governments often exploit religious loyalties, issues and organizations to amass power and avoid economic responsibilities. However, my research in the Muslim world shows that the holy season of Ramadan pushes authoritarian governments to respond to citizens’ demands for redistribution. At this time of year, public religiosity and religious norms of empathy and charity make people more attentive to the plight of others and encourage governments to act. So, while religious norms might be blamed for some social problems, they can also remedy others and drive positive change. This is particularly critical in developing societies where religiosity remains prevalent.

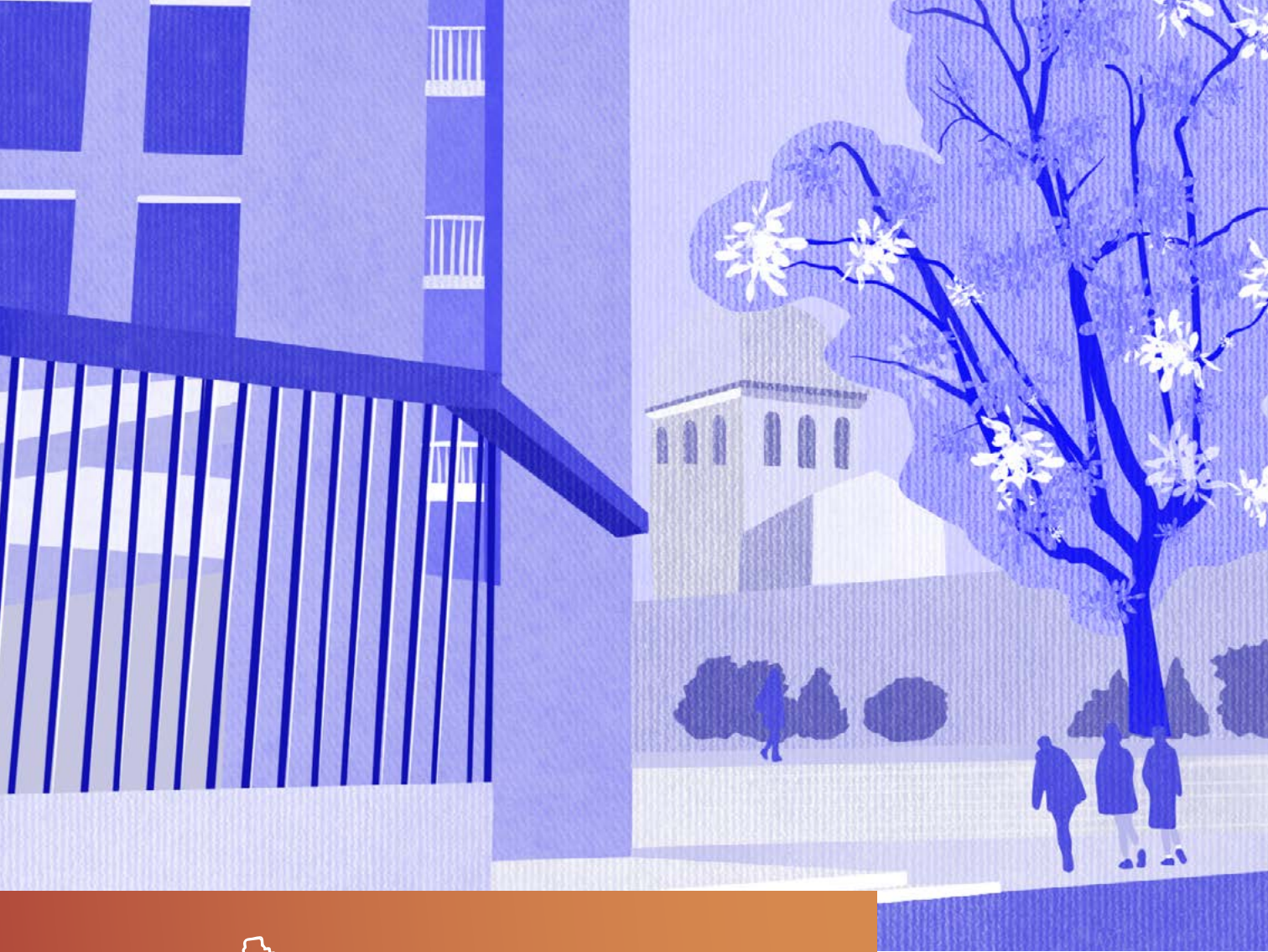


PAUL SEABRIGHT
ECONOMICS
FORMER DIRECTOR, IAST

‘Religions must open their doors’

The power of religious movements to sway populations will depend on their ability to persuade rather than coerce. Even in non-authoritarian political systems, they will do so more effectively if they can compete in the public square just as other organizations – businesses, charities, political parties – compete for the public’s consent. Their long-run legitimacy, which is clearly under threat in countries where they are seen to have abused their power, will depend on their willingness to agree to greater transparency and accountability.





**JOIN OUR RESEARCH
CENTER IN THE HISTORIC
HEART OF TOULOUSE,
SOUTHWEST FRANCE**

We offer Research and Visiting Fellowships in a large range of disciplines in the social, behavioral and life sciences: anthropology, evolutionary biology, economics, history, law, mathematics, philosophy, political science, psychology and sociology.

Learn more on how to apply at iast.fr/apply



www.iast.fr